

I'LL BRING
YOU THE BIRDS
FROM OUT
OF THE SKY



BRIAN HODGE

I'll Bring You the Birds from Out of the Sky

Brian Hodge

Cemetery Dance Publications
Baltimore, Maryland
2018

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Cemetery Dance Publications
132-B Industry Lane, Unit #7
Forest Hill, MD 21050
<http://www.cemeterydance.com>

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ISBN-13: 978-1-58767-672-7

Front Cover Artwork © 2018 by Kim Parkhurst
Digital Design by Dan Hocker

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He had heard of archaeologists who arrived at some remote and forgotten site, next to nothing jutting through the topsoil. He'd heard of how they would dig awhile, then realize they had made their life's greatest find, the discovery that would occupy them the rest of their days. Heard of it, but never felt it. Until he first set eyes on the work of Cecil Conklin.

It never happened this way. It never would again. Timothy knew that. Knew to spare a breath of thanks to whatever gods looked out for art and madmen and savants. And, while he was at it, granddaughters who wished to do right by their ancestors.

When she first came into his gallery, she looked like someone who should've been *in* the paintings on his walls, rather than staring at them. *Willowy*—he only thought he'd seen young women the word applied to. Now he knew better. Her hair hung to her elbows, all one length, the color of rosewood. Her face was long, too, and her eyes enormous. She would look gaunt one day, years from now. She seemed unsure of herself: not who she was, but where; not what she was doing, but how best to get it done.

Timothy stepped around the counter to join her on the main floor and asked if he could help.

"It says 'Randolph Gallery of Folk Art' on the sign outside." She shook her head at the walls. "Only I don't see anything around that looks like something I'd ever see back home."

Not a good way to start, but she was young, around his daughter's age, so that won her points.

"Ask five people to define 'folk art' and you might get five different definitions. They can all be right," he said. "Where's home?"

"West Virginia. Little town called Buell." She headed him off with a disarmingly crooked grin. "You've never heard of it."

"What brings you to Richmond?"

"You here." At her side, along the breezy folds of her ankle-length skirt, she toted a nylon pack, a messenger's bag that had already carried a few messages too many. He'd really been hoping she wasn't planning on opening it. "Can you look at something and tell if it's any good or not?"

Timothy held his hands up and out. "It would only be one person's opinion. That shouldn't make any difference to you whether—"

But her hands were already plunging into the bag, the girl dissuaded by neither words nor tone. Someday he was going to have to work on his

discouragement skills.

“Relax, it’s not mine. My great-granddaddy did this.”

After she slid it free of the bag and unwrapped it from a layer of towels, she presented the painting and awaited judgment, lower lip pinched between her teeth.

Whether it was any good or not wasn’t the first matter that came to mind. He was just relieved the painting wasn’t hers. Nobody should see the world that way at her age.

Actually, nobody should see the world that way at any age, period.

“He was the kind my folks used to say had the devil in him. I don’t know about that. It wasn’t meanness in him, not that I ever saw. No matter what others might’ve said. I don’t think he knew how to talk to people. He was the type that would’ve been happiest if nobody else was around for a hundred miles. That would’ve suited him fine. He just seemed lost. If Cecil Conklin had the devil in him, he forgot where he put him.”

Two years ago Timothy Randolph wouldn’t have liked the painting. Two years ago he couldn’t have imagined how anyone else could like it either.

Nona Conklin was the young woman’s name, and he had told her the truth. Folk art could mean different things to different people, even at different times in their lives.

What Timothy had loved first, as a teenager and as a younger man, were the practical artifacts of years and decades past. He’d felt a draw toward items that had been made for everyday life, yet possessed some deeper intangible quality—a flourish beyond craftsmanship, a soul that could never dwell in plastic. They’d been created at leisure, for lives built around, not minutes, but soil and sunlight and seasons. Weather vanes that looked ready to take flight. Quilts that revealed family histories as sure as hieroglyphs. The hex signs of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

He’d never lived in such times or places, yet missed them anyway.

Later, he came to love the paintings of artists who were just as unlikely to have lived in them either. He connected to the yearning behind their pigments. The longing was widely shared, if the gallery's sales were anything to go by, a hunger for something simpler penetrating the cities and suburbs. People had an urge to flee, if only they knew where to go. The paintings showed the place, but not the pathway.

There was a naivety to them, a childlike simplicity to their composition and technique. He doubted such nostalgia could be rendered any other way. These villages and farms had never existed. These people had never been neighbors. Yet here they all were, just the same. The fires in their pot-bellied stoves never burned out. They skated on ponds whose ice never broke through. The maples they tapped for sap would never fall, and the lambs were never meant for slaughter.

If such paintings were lies, they were comforting lies, although Timothy saw them as something nobler. They were fantasies for people whose hearts needed them, no less than the nymphs and satyrs of the Romantics.

But Nona Conklin's great-grandfather had had a very different vision, one that Timothy was now ready to see as equally valid, even more honest. It had leapfrogged out of the past and landed in front of him at the right time. Two years of grief had had a recalibrating effect.

Art of great power was like that. It hung on, waiting. It wanted to be discovered.

Here was the darker reality, a starker truth. Here was the work of an artist who lived high in the hills he'd painted, and known the dirt so well because it was already under his fingernails.

Timothy took the painting back into his office, Nona too, where they wouldn't be disturbed. He set it under the lights and became its audience, to follow where it led.

It was painted on wood, the back of a cabinet door, fourteen inches by twenty-four. It gave an impression of trees at twilight, heavy on blues and blacks with a subtle orange tint here and there, like a mist that descended the hills the trees were climbing. He found the orange mysterious, even jarring—the color of sunset without evoking the feeling. The trees' trunks had been painted with care, but their branches had been wrought with frenzy, scratched into the medium so fiercely the wood itself was scored. It was a study in contrasts, both crude and sophisticated, delicate yet brutal.

The bottom of the frame glowed with the suggestion of home and simple comforts, but this was devoured by a feeling of menace, of unseen things waiting to emerge from the shadows. Tendrils of darkness curled around the orange, flowing over and down the hills like living shadows.

“I brought this one because I thought it would travel better than any of the other’n’s,” Nona said. “You, you probably don’t do much bus riding, but me, I got a hand-me-down truck I don’t trust more than thirty miles at a time, so it was the bus or don’t get here at all.”

He’d yet to take his gaze off the painting. It compelled the eye. It focused one’s attention. It conjured feelings in him that abraded against each other. He wanted to be there, in those hills, even though he knew he would want to run.

“How many others?”

“I never counted. There’d be dozens, though.”

She held her phone toward him and flicked through a series of snapshots, too small to discern much detail, only to confirm they existed and he found them enticing.

“Are they all on wood?”

“No. Like I was saying, I only picked this one because it was. It’s the littlest of the wood ones. Cecil seemed to paint on whatever he had around handy. Cabinet doors, like that one, and bigger. Plywood. Roof shingles, he did a few on those. But he did plenty on canvas, too, like normal. They say he used to bring home other people’s paintings so he could paint over them. He wouldn’t’ve had much money to go buy them, so that just leaves finding or stealing.”

“And you never met him?”

“Oh no. He was dead near fifty years before I came along. He didn’t even get to see my granddaddy full grown. Cecil barely made it to thirty. For me growing up, he was just someone the rest of the family’d get to talking about sometimes, usually when I was listening from another room. That’s the only way I knew about him. I don’t think it was before I was fourteen that I knew we were related. I just thought they were talking about some crazy man they remembered from way back.”

What would that make—five years with the truth? He was guessing Nona was nineteen, around there. College age, if she could afford it. Doomed if she couldn’t.

“There’s still a few people around that remember him firsthand, and they’re all of them old as dirt now. That’s where I found out more. I made recordings. That’s the best thing you can do for people that’s been around that long. Just sit down ready to listen and let them chatter. I found out more about Cecil by talking to them than I ever did my own kin. Only you don’t always know what to believe.”

Timothy wondered what the man meant to her, once she knew their connection, and didn’t have to reach far. Everyone loved a scoundrel in the family tree, as long as his crimes were minor enough. And one like this...? He might appeal to a teenager with different ideas for her life than what everyone else wanted to impose on her. If there was anything in Nona’s life that she regarded as her art, she could look to someone behind her who’d borne a stigma for his own.

As Nona sat on the visitor’s side of his desk, she spun around the framed photos perched at its corners, studied them, spun them into place again. She lingered over one, peering at it, then him, back and forth.

“Is this *you*?” she asked, clearly unsure.

“When there was a lot more of me.”

“You look very...prosperous here,” she said, and he had to laugh at the diplomacy of it, then she was back inspecting the photo. “Is this your wife?”

“Her name was Radha.”

She got it immediately, and didn’t ask for more. “*Was*—there’s times I hate that word.”

“Me too.” He told her more anyway. “Somebody ran a red light.”

As they sat in the quiet for a few moments, he felt no urge to break it, the most comfortable silence he’d shared with a stranger in ages. Nona looked again at the photos of his daughter and appeared to fear the worst.

“Her name’s Lynette,” he said. “*Is*.”

“Good.” Nona was visibly relieved. “Lynette’s a pretty name.”

“I’d like to see the other paintings. I’m assuming that’s what you were hoping for. Now. *Why* do you want me to?”

“I have this friend named Lucas. We met at the community college. He’s the only other one besides me who’s seen these paintings since...well, I don’t know when. Maybe ever, some of them. Lucas thinks they’re the work of genius. I don’t know if they are or aren’t. But for starters, what I’d

like is to clear my great-granddaddy's reputation while there's still people around who remember it."

No talk of money. He assumed they'd get there eventually. If it wasn't her idea, then it would be this Lucas boy's.

"Do you think people's souls rest easier when their names are cleared?"

He had to sit with that one, and still came up with nothing. "I don't know. I've never thought about it."

"I do. I think they do. All the little hurts and wrong ideas people have about us...I don't think it all just goes away. I think it lingers. It's unfinished business."

Not the best news he'd ever heard.

One way or another, he'd been hoping for a clean slate someday.

"God never made a lazier man. Never put a more slothful soul in a fella big enough to wrestle an ox to the ground. That's why I never put any stock in that jibber-jabber about Cecil having something to do with what happened to those hunters. He didn't have the gumption. Cecil could've had steady work if he wanted it. A man like that in the mines, he could've outworked any other two put together. He just wasn't interested. Work didn't offer anything he wanted. He'd rather get him some of that maple-flavored 'shine the Daggett brothers used to still, and lay up with that whore from over the mountain. He'd do some half-hearted farmhanding now and again to pick himself up some scratch, and that'd do him for gainful work for a good long spell. I wouldn't be the first to go speculating he was touched in the head. More like thumped pretty goddamn hard."

He offered Nona a choice: return home and he would follow in two days, or let him put her up in a motel so they could make the drive together. Nona chose the latter but didn't say why—if she was eager to spend time in Richmond, or if she saw the ride back to West Virginia as a chance to better take his measure.

Maybe she was just sick of busses.

But the farther away they got from his home and the closer they drew to hers, he began to suspect what she really wanted was to travel beside him, trading one world for another, and see things as he saw them for the first time: two worlds in one, layered together in poison and symbiosis.

The hills unfurled toward every horizon in rolling green waves, the trees packed so tightly their canopies looked as smooth as a carpet. It was April, and everything was alive and new again, as fresh and wet as morning.

The two-lane blacktop cut through it in swooping curves, traversing shabby towns that had been dying for longer than they'd thrived. Neat white houses hugged the hillsides, while the main streets were gauntlets of brick buildings the color of dried blood, too many windows broken or boarded over with corrugated tin. Every few miles, a steeple pointed up and away.

"They were nice once. I've seen pictures," Nona said. "But the easy coal was getting tapped out before I was born."

He could imagine a day here when the train trestles, sturdy iron and blackened oak on stone pillars, would be the last things standing.

"*Leave*—that's all the advice I ever hear. 'Get away while you can. Stay too long, you'll be trapped too, just you wait and see.'" The look on her face as she peered out the window was that of a daughter sitting vigil in a hospice. "Foo on that. I don't want to leave."

Sometimes they fell into an unwitting race with a locomotive from the Norfolk Southern line, or whipped alongside swift streams that lunged parallel to the road, whitecapped with vernal meltwater.

"Who you are, you take it with you wherever you go," Nona said. "But there's nothing like being in the place you know and that knows you back. Some folks, we're just not ourselves unless we're there."

Maybe *that* explained her stay in Richmond. She'd wanted to make sure.

In spite of all the damage done.

One region they passed through was as blasted as a moonscape, lush green in the distance on the right and nothing but arid brown to the left. Entire mountains were as denuded as the skulls of the condemned, beheaded for the last coal they had to give, then gutted and left for dead. The valleys and streams between were choked with rubble and the broken bones of the hills, a home fit only for microbes now. A century of war would have treated them better.

“Not far now. We’re almost there,” Nona said. “Almost Heaven, West Virginia. You ever hear that song?”

“There’s always that person the others point out to scare the younguns into minding. You know what I mean? ‘Come straight home and don’t dawdle, or he’ll catch you and drag you off and nobody’ll ever see you again.’ ‘Don’t you sass me none, or she’ll hear it and come cook you up.’ The peculiar thing is, it took most of his life for Cecil Conklin to get to that point. Any other place, it would’ve been him all along. He looked the part. Big old monster like him? But right up until the end, I never heard a soul say anything like that about him. Not until that awful business here and over in Drummond. They said a bear did it, but that was a hard sell for some people. The stupid ones, mostly. The rest, I think they always knew deep down Cecil was the one in trouble, that something was after him already. He never should’ve gone over the mountain.”

Nona owned it all now, this shaded green land where generations of Conklins had been growing up since before living memory. Her inheritance of earth and trees had come down as an heirloom of love given out of spite.

Earlier this spring she had become, in spirit if not the letter of the law, an orphan. Her parents weren’t dead, but they’d made themselves so scarce they might as well have been, and her grandparents had long regarded them as though they were already. Her mother was in the middle of an eight-year sentence at Lakin, her father carried on awaiting the woman’s release, and neither of them had cared a whit for the homestead. When she’d passed in early March, Nona’s grandmother hadn’t wanted a single clod of its soil to end up in their ungrateful possession. Traits and talents sometimes skipped generations, and so it was with the land.

Nona showed Timothy around, both the new house and the old. The new was familiar before they’d even stepped from his Lexus—they’d passed so

many like it on the way, but it was better kept than most. Two trim stories, whitewashed and tidy, fronted by a porch and crowded by trees.

The old house, though, was a relic from another era, even in a region that seemed to lag behind everywhere else. It overlooked the new, or would when the trees dropped their leaves. Getting there was no more than a two- or three-minute walk upslope, but each step seemed to peel back decades. More cabin than house, it was the weathered gray of dense wood cured as hard as stone, a rough-hewn refuge from the elements and animals that paced outside its door plotting a way in.

It felt important to see where the paintings had come from before he looked at any more of them. Context before evaluation—he'd never had this chance before.

"That's where I found them all," Nona said. "Stuffed in the pantry, every one of them. It looks to stay cool and dry in there, so they kept pretty well. Lots of dust, but somebody'd put sheets over them a long time ago."

"Your grandparents?"

"Must've been. Whoever it was, I guess they couldn't bring themselves to either fetch them down to the new house or get rid of them."

"Weren't you ever inside here before?" A place like this would never have been safe when he was a boy. He would've known every corner, every board.

"It wasn't for lack of urge. They kept the place sealed up tight. Had a padlock on the front door. I never could find the key. My friend Lucas and I finally broke it open a few weeks back. Had to take the hasp off just to get inside. You've never heard screws screech like they did coming out of that door. And the back door, that was boarded over with plywood. All the windows, too. Lucas used a crowbar to pull those down." Nona shrugged, a what-are-you-going-to-do shrug. "He's taken a liking to staying up here weekends. Like camping out when you've still got to have a roof over your head and a floor under your butt. I keep thinking the new will wear off, but it hasn't yet."

"Is Lucas your boyfriend?"

She cackled. "He thinks so."

The inside was about what he'd expected, spartan, aired out and the floors swept until the shoe-worn planks looked as smooth as a ship's deck. It had been emptied long ago, except for the black iron monstrosity of a

coal stove squatting in the corner of the front room, its pipe feeding up through the ceiling. A few feet away sat the only thing that looked new, a cot he assumed Lucas had installed.

But this wasn't where Nona's great-grandfather had preferred to work.

Until winters drove him inside, Cecil did his painting in what she called the shed, an outbuilding big enough to shelter a car, although Timothy doubted it had ever held one. Not up here. A wagon, perhaps, in the distant past, and a stabled mule, but any traces of such use had faded decades ago.

Seventy years later the shed remained an artist's, if you looked past nature's attempt to reclaim its roof and wall. Two corroded turpentine cans sat crumbling on a rickety shelf. The top of an ancient workbench still held a scattering of smaller cans, full of cobwebs; smears and splotches of paint lingered beneath a cataract of solidified dust. On a shelf below the bench top, a cigar box blackened with mildew or fungus held a collection of handcrafted brushes and, in one corner, the dried-out husks of baby mice.

He'd been in studios before, in city lofts and century-old farmhouses renovated with every convenience and gardens for sunny days. Nothing like this. Even in Cecil Conklin's lifetime, this would've been a battle against the very forces he tried to paint.

Timothy stepped over to a narrow clearing behind the property, peering up the slopes that rose and fell and rose again. He couldn't decide if this was a forest lost amid the rolling hills, or a succession of hills swallowed by a forest. Either way, he recognized it from the painting Nona had brought to entice him here.

He wondered if, when the light was right, it still spilled its orange tendrils like a bottle of ink tipped on its side to cascade down the steeps. Or if that was something only Cecil could see.

"I don't know what all he got up to in that shed. I reckon that's where he did his painting that folks would wag and cluck their tongues about. The way most folks saw it, painting, it's all right for an old woman to take up, keep herself occupied, but an able-bodied man in his prime...no, missy. Folks saw something suspect in that. And that's without seeing *what* he was

painting. But like I was about to say, sometimes when the sound carried just right, you could hear him working at it. He'd cuss it and yell and moan on about it. It didn't seem to bring him one bit of joy. We lived close, just down the mountain a ways, and you could see the light burning in that shed at all hours. He might go at it all day, through the night, and still be at it come morning. Folks thought he was lazy, but that was just when it came to the kind of work anybody could do. You couldn't listen to him going at it and not think it was hard work. He could pick up a bale of hay and toss it up into a loft one-handed, and that wouldn't be a fraction of the effort it sounded like it took for him to get whatever was inside him out onto the painting. Us kids, we'd sneak up the hill and try to get a look at him in there, but we always lost our nerve before we got all the way. Every time except for the once, and...and never mind about that."

If you had nothing but his paintings to go by, the only conclusion you could draw was that Nona's great-grandfather had been a ferociously morbid man. Timothy had also been listening to her archive of interview recordings, copied over to his phone, and if they rounded the man out more, they did nothing to dispel the notion. Cecil Conklin seemed to have been obsessed with mortality and decay and the fragile vulnerability of human beings against a natural world forever encroaching upon them.

As in this painting, in which the landscape was rendered as a kind of anatomical cutaway. Where other people might observe only trees, he saw deeper, beneath the topsoil, to the roots that drew their nutrients from archipelagos of unmarked graves. Their occupants lay uneasy and restless, cauled in blankets of orange—orange again—that looked almost like cocoons.

And as in this painting, an aerial view in which an entire mountain range became the broken spine of a vast, sprawling corpse, riddled with pockets of purple-black decay and nibbled upon by scavengers that grew bloated, then burst into noxious-looking clouds to spread the contamination beyond.

They were all like that. Beneath their flowers, meadows were rife with foulness and corruption, and shadows were home to beasts whose mouths

lolloped to disgorge a denser darkness. In night, Conklin saw the ally of predators and half-human witches, in which stars became a swarm of tiny eyes peering from far regions as black and viscous as tar. Life itself was the ultimate omnivore, never sated, and shelter was an illusion. Barns were where the killing was done, and houses where the dead lay dreaming.

Taken together, the paintings bordered on overwhelming, and Nona had filled a bedroom with them. They were stacked against the walls, lying on her grandmother's bed, propped against her dresser. Seventy-three, he counted. None of them were dated, none of them titled. What Timothy judged to be the earliest works hadn't even been signed.

But they deserved their audience—of that he was certain. He hadn't spent two hours with them before arranging for transport, a truck with a crew of specialists who would bundle them with more tender care than they'd known in decades, and ferry them back to Richmond.

It would take a few days, though. First, the crew had an estate sale in Great Falls to wrap up. Timothy decided to stay for the duration. When he offered to find his own lodging, Nona wouldn't hear of it. Don't be silly, she told him. There wasn't anyplace worth staying for miles around. Besides, she owed him the hospitality.

And so, with no rush, he began his preliminary work.

He numbered the paintings, tagged their backs with stickers. He catalogued them, making note of any damage the years had dealt, and whatever cleanings and repairs would prove needed. It was slow, meticulous going, and Nona left him to it, except when she got to feeling she wasn't being a proper hostess, and brought him coffee or herbal tea and chocolate confections she called preacher cookies.

Most of all, though, he studied them.

There was no way of assigning the paintings a precise chronology, but it didn't seem unreasonable to surmise that Conklin had started rough and gotten better, simply through the process of doing. Nothing known about him indicated he'd had so much as an hour of formal training. What he lacked in sophistication he more than compensated for with the verve of his vision and the raw power of his expression—often a hallmark of people whose art was labeled as outsider or naïve or primitive. Nobody told them what they should and shouldn't do, so they did whatever they wanted.

He'd had an experimental side. There was the scratching, of course, more erratic and violent than the controlled technique of *sgraffito*, which Cecil likely hadn't known about anyway. That he'd made his own brushes may or may not have been out of necessity, but he obviously hadn't seen this as a limitation. Instead, he cultivated the textural nuances wrought by different kinds of hair and fur, from stiff to silky.

In many paintings, background shadings hadn't been applied with a brush at all; at first, it was impossible to tell exactly what Conklin had used. Under the magnifying glass, one appeared to have a residue of miniscule chunks left behind. When Timothy probed with the point of a straight pin, he found, as though sealed airtight in amber, a tiny organic tuft of green.

Moss? That was it. Conklin had used moss as a stippling sponge.

One insight opened the door to others. In some paintings, layers of paint had been applied with leaves or feathers; in others, it had been rolled on with curled bark. It was as if Conklin had done everything he could think of to not merely depict the world around him, but physically imbed it in the paintings.

There seemed something shamanic about it, intended to either invite the wild in or repel it, to appease it or control it.

Timothy had to stop himself. This was guesswork of the most irresponsible kind.

Sadly, it was always the same with dead artists: Their intentions died with them.

"My daddy was friendly with him. Not friends, exactly, but, you know, friendly. As I recall, Mr. Conklin only ever made his own paintbrushes. Probably rather drink the money, if he didn't absolutely have to spend it. It didn't hinder him none, not when you got half of Noah's ark around here growing all kinds of hair to cut for bristles. Well, him and my daddy was out jawing of an evening when they spotted a fox creeping along the edge of the clearing. Mr. Conklin excused himself, just as polite as pie. He walked over and that fox didn't move. It just hunkered down trembling while he took a knee beside it and snipped a pinch of hair from that big

bushy tail. Then he came back and picked up the talk like nothing happened. Daddy said he'd never seen the like of it."

Of course the high of discovery was too good to last.

By midday Thursday, Timothy realized he'd been so enthralled by everything that was here, he'd been blind to what wasn't. He was too old for tantrums, but with Nona back at school and no one around to hear him, he threw one anyway. How else was he supposed to react upon discovering that the Conklin collection was incomplete?

For all he knew, another seventy-three works could have been lost to time or the pyromania of disapproving neighbors. So it wasn't just any missing painting. It took context to recognize the gap. What was missing was a panel in what Conklin had apparently intended to be a triptych.

A third of Cecil's one and only effort to create a masterwork.

The first two parts had been painted on the backs of identical wooden panels that appeared to have been doors from a tall armoire or wardrobe. At one point they'd been joined with strips of leather. Too thick for a man's belt, these may have come from a horse's girth strap, or the rigging for a draft animal, that had been hacked into lengths of eight or nine inches, then tacked into the back of the panels like hinges. Three on one panel, three on another. At some point they'd become detached, but it was obvious there must have been a third panel. The way the other two fit together, it looked to be the rightmost that was absent.

The left panel depicted a phantasmagoric ascent, a side view of an indistinct figure, little more than a smudge, making a solitary slog uphill. Its pose suggested weariness, but for no reason he could clarify, Timothy drew from it a sense of resolve. It was the brighter of the two panels, its meandering green pathway open and spacious, its trees whimsically friendly beneath a pale sun whose light spiraled across a clear cerulean sky.

The center panel depicted the opposite, a descent, and was altogether darker, claustrophobic. The sky had gone gray, low clouds the color of bruises occluding the sun, while hostile trees bullied their way around the path. The other side of the same mountain, real or metaphorical, seemed a

reasonable conclusion. But here the figure was more defined, its lines sharper, more purpose in its pose. Timothy didn't think this was an accident. It was deliberate, as if the figure had found a greater meaning on this side. At the bottom of the path waited what may or may not have been a welcoming hand, extending inward from the edge of the panel. Whatever it was, Conklin had rendered it in orange.

Up, then down...and then what?

With Nona not due back until late afternoon, he searched wherever he could think of, peering under beds, rummaging through closets and pantries, unfolding the slatted stairway to the attic. In defeat, he tried up at the old house, even its shed, as if a painting that size could hide there.

He could think of no reason Nona would've had to separate it from the rest, but had to ask anyway when she got home from Thursday's classes. It was all news to her. She'd never realized there had been a triptych, much less that part of it was missing.

"You said your friend Lucas helped you break into the old house. Did he help you carry everything down here, too?"

She nodded. "He would've gone hungry that day if he hadn't."

"Would he have taken it?"

"I don't see how. But you can ask him tomorrow when he gets here for the weekend."

What conclusion did that leave, then? That the panel had been separated from the others for years, decades, maybe even since Cecil Conklin had been alive.

"Could somebody else around here have it? Did Cecil ever give his paintings to people?"

"I never heard of him trying. If he had, I don't think he'd've had many takers. You've been listening to those recordings, you know how people felt about him."

True. The composite that had been gelling was that of a man who'd had plenty of neighbors and acquaintances without necessarily having close friends.

Although he'd had descendants.

"Forgive my language, I'm only quoting from one of them," Timothy said. "A man mentioned something about Cecil and 'that whore from over the mountain.'"

“He’s talking about my great-grandmother. Olivia. Livvy.” It was the only time he’d seen Nona bristle. “They were common law wed, no preachers involved. You can guess how that set with the more churchy types. Which was probably most of them. Still is. They pick and choose what suits them. ‘A man shall not lay with another man,’ they’re good about latching on to parts like that. But ‘Judge not, lest ye be judged,’ that goes in one ear and out the other.”

“It sounded like there was a history of bias against people from over there.”

“Yeah, it seems back then, they didn’t think much of the folks on the other side of the mountain. Broadwater Hollow, is what it was called,” Nona said. “Everybody’s gotta have somebody else to look down on, and I guess them over there was all they had. Too backwoods for ’em, I suppose, can you imagine?”

Meaning this was where Cecil’s in-laws had lived. He hadn’t considered another branch of the man’s family until now. “Does anybody still live over there?”

“Not in my lifetime. It’s all gone back over there. Dead, dead, dead. It was too hard to get to, and no good reason to go in the first place. There was never a real road in. Hardly even a path anymore. I’ve only been there once myself, years back, one of those summers when all you do is run your legs to stumps with your friends.”

“You told me Cecil didn’t make it past thirty. After he died, did Olivia go back over there, do you know?”

“I couldn’t tell you. Had it been me, under the circumstances? I probably would’ve. At least for a time.”

Circumstances. He realized he’d only been assuming that Cecil had succumbed to some illness. Nona hadn’t actually specified.

“How did he die?”

“He strung himself up. One of the trees by the shed. Around here, there’s plenty of shame in that for whoever’s left.” Nona shook her head before he could pry further. “I don’t know why he did it. If he left her a note, nobody else knew about it. Maybe he didn’t need to. Maybe all the reason he could ever give was in the paintings already.”

Timothy supposed you could speculate as much about any artist, if you looked hard enough. Cecil, though...? Maybe with him it was truer than

with most.

“Are you wondering if Livvy took that painting with her, is that what you’re getting at?”

“Somebody had to take it somewhere.”

And given the time and place, it seemed likely to have gone no farther than where it could’ve been taken on foot.

“My momma knew him. The way she talked, they were sweet on each other as kids. Nothing ever come of it. She said Cecil wasn’t always the way he got to be. Said he used to love his fun as much as anyone. Well, I’ve seen a lot of the men around here lose that quality fast. But she still puzzled on it. She thought it had to do with that growth spurt they say he went through. Maybe it turned him self-conscious. See, I never knew the Conklins to be tall people. They always seemed to run toward that runty Irish stock. You, young lady, you must be the tallest Conklin to come along since him, but you’re normal enough, and look like you’re done. My momma said it was their eighteenth summer when Cecil started shooting up like a weed again. That ain’t normal. That had to turn him awkward.”

Late Friday afternoon brought the official end of the school week. Not something he’d thought of in two years, and already he’d forgotten the exuberance it brought with it. Lynette had been a sophomore at UVA when Radha had been killed, and once she’d finished the semester, her intentions to attend the next one had gone into limbo. It had been her dream to travel Europe after she graduated, and she wasn’t going to defer the dream any longer. Life was too short and there were no guarantees.

Two years into a month-long trip, Lynette had yet to come back, a phantom at the other end of postcards and the occasional phone call.

He hadn’t realized how much the sense of fatherhood had been slipping away from him, a slower, sneakier loss than his sense of having been a

husband. He hadn't realized how young Nona truly was. Hadn't felt truly old around her until now, now that Lucas was here as well.

Timothy had been prepared to dislike him, but couldn't. He remembered being that skinny, that angular. He remembered having that kind of unfocused energy. He'd never wanted a patchy beard, though, or to grow his hair long enough to pull back and keep in a knot on the back of his head. It had never occurred to him to try. The look seemed wholly cultivated—it was the suspenders Lucas wore that gave him away—his idea of what a mountain man should look like.

And, as Timothy feared, he knew nothing of the triptych's third panel. Like Nona, he'd never assembled the pieces to recognize Cecil's intentions.

"Wow," Lucas said while looking at the other two panels side-by-side, imagining what the whole was meant to be. "That makes him even more of a genius than I thought he was." Abruptly, he fixed Timothy with a challenging stare. "You agree he's a genius, right? I mean, look at all this. How could anyone not?"

In truth, Timothy didn't know. Few words were more overused than *genius*.

He nodded anyway. "Cecil seems to have independently discovered a lot of techniques most painters need training to learn, and devised a few of his own."

"That's what I'm getting at. A triptych...where'd he get the idea for that? You know what it reminds me of? Hieronymus Bosch. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*? One part paradise, one part earth, one part hell?" He looked back at the two panels. Ascent, descent, unknown. "It's not as ambitious as that, but what else is? What are the odds a man of Cecil's time and place is even going to be exposed to an idea like that?"

"Slim," Timothy said. "It's not impossible. But slim."

Lucas jammed his hands on his hips and leaned forward, as if the missing piece would materialize if he only stared hard enough. He reached out and pecked his fingertips at the empty space. "We need that. This is the grand slam, right here. I can feel it. We need that piece *bad*."

Interesting. Lucas seemed to be thinking like a promoter, and he wasn't wrong to. The question was why.

"What *is* your interest in this?" Timothy asked. "Really?"

“It made him restless, that was his problem. Once he started courting that Olivia girl, it divided his loyalties. He started spending all that time with her people. He didn’t know where he wanted to be. They used to joke that was what made him get so freakish big. All that tramping back and forth over the mountain made Cecil start growing again. But to hear him talk, when he was on this side he wanted to be over yonder, and when he was over in the holler, he wanted to be back here. He couldn’t choose. You have to settle. People who can’t settle usually come to a bad end.”

Lucas saved the question for dinner, as the three of them sat around the kitchen table and broke bread over savory bowls of chicken stew that Nona had left simmering all day in the slow cooker. This had never really been about clearing Cecil Conklin’s name with the last surviving elders who remembered him—or if it had, it was important only to Nona, and even then, of secondary concern.

He could’ve felt manipulated, but Timothy didn’t fault her. It was a good hook, emotional and uncomplicated. She’d been shrewd to hold the rest back until he’d seen the paintings for himself.

“What it is,” Lucas said, “I figure one of the worst things in the world must be to be driven away from the home you want be in because you can’t make a go of it there. But that’s where we’re at. Nona doesn’t want to have to leave here. I don’t want to have to leave. There’s a bunch of us who don’t.”

“Cities aren’t for everybody,” Nona said. “I’m not scared of them. I just don’t like them. I like green around me too much.” Her forehead creased. “I’ve spent years seeing on TV and online all these things and places I’m supposed to be interested in...and why, just because my age ends in ‘teen’? I don’t want it. I feel *sorry* for those people. There’s something a lot more real to me here, if we could just hang onto it.”

Lucas was nodding. “You’d be surprised how many of us there are who don’t want to sell their birthright for a mess of pottage.” Biblical allusions now. Jacob and Esau. “You saw what they did to the mountains on your way here. People let the mining companies buy them out, then that’s what they go do, take a few months to destroy what took millions of years to build, and what do the people have left then? A new truck? Yeah, try leaving that truck to your kids and grandkids to grow up in.” This was a lot of disgust for a twenty-year-old face. Lucas then softened as he pointed to the bedroom where they’d moved the paintings. “Then we found those.”

Timothy began to see the possibilities they had envisioned.

They weren’t naïve enough to think the discovery of a lost and overlooked artist would save a region, or even a hamlet. It wouldn’t bring in tourists to see his work. His birthplace would inspire no pilgrimages. Still, it was a start. Any publicity about it would be good for a place too often dismissed as backward and benighted.

Handled right, though, and properly introduced, Conklin’s work could draw considerable interest. Exhibits, collectors, licensing, books. Art historians and scholars would write articles on how he’d accomplished his body of work in such isolation. Cecil Conklin might never be regarded as an important figure, but he could be a fascinating one, and that might be enough. His legacy could generate a windfall for his heir, maybe a substantial one.

Nona was quick to correct him on that. “I’m not interested in any windfall for my sake alone. I’m not the type to sit back and go, ‘Woo hoo, I got mine, for something I didn’t even do, the rest of you are on your own.’ That’s not me.”

Lucas looked at him, plainly impressed with her, and nodded. “It really isn’t.”

“I’m interested in it if it could be the seed money for something more,” Nona went on. “Something that puts back into the area.”

He genuinely liked their idealism. How practical it would be, he didn’t know, but he liked it. “Such as?”

Already they looked less certain.

“We’ve been kicking ideas around. Nona and I, we started up a campus group that talks about this stuff. How to keep the good parts of our heritage alive and healthy, and not buried under the bad parts. You know...poverty.

Ignorance. Suspicion. There are groups on other campuses in the region, too. It's a movement."

"Ideas, you said?"

"An organic farm, maybe. Another guy in our group, he's got a cousin who's a buyer for Whole Foods, so we've got an in there. Or a dairy. Me, I'd be ecstatic if the pols in Charleston would get with the century and see the writing on the wall and legalize weed. I'd love to be a pot farmer."

Nona gave Timothy a flat look and sounded flatter still. "He's experienced."

They talked through the evening about dreams indulged and dreams deferred, about lineages and land, and it made him ache for them, that here were two people with a better grasp of who they were than he could remember ever having at their age, or, for that matter, sometimes even now. They came by it authentically, and knew what they wanted, and the only thing standing in their way was the momentum of the world.

For their sake, he wished he had the power to move mountains.

For now, all he could really do was walk over one.

"If people started looking at him funny, he only had his own fool self to blame. He done it to himself, taking up with that Olivia whore. And yeah, I see you giving me the stink-eye there, girl, I'm not so blind I'll miss that. You go on and do it if it makes you feel better. I know she was your kin, but what you got to understand is, back then, a body learned early we didn't mix with those Broadwater people. That's the way it'd been for a long time, and the way it should've stayed. There was something wrong with those people. Way worse than what you call your white trash. To this day I'm glad to see them gone. Those people weren't Christian, not a one. Make a mockery of the Lord's Supper, the way I heard they'd do, serving up mushrooms or some such. I don't know what they sunk their roots into, faithwise, but by god we didn't want any part of it over here."

They set out the next morning, the air cool and damp with dawn. Congregations of birds sang from trees whose leaves dripped into the quiet that surrounded them like a sphere, a vast living hush imprinted with the echoes of a more primal world. It made him want to step lightly, speak softly, as if the mountain were slow to awaken and did not take kindly to being rushed.

He and Nona trudged up the path to the old house, the smell of dew so heavy he could taste it. She'd traded her usual breezy dresses for jeans and a sweatshirt. They found Lucas still in boxer shorts, a blanket draped like a cape over his bony shoulders. He'd brewed coffee in an enameled percolator heating on the flat top of the black iron stove, and poured mugs for himself and Timothy. Nona declined, calling it too early in the day for jitters.

Fueled, they slung on their light backpacks of food and water, then continued onward, upward, following the ghost of a well-worn path that by now was little more than memory.

The trip was a longshot, but they had to try. If Nona couldn't think of a single neighbor Cecil might have given the painting to, then maybe it *had* gone over to his wife's side of the mountain. That wouldn't explain why it had been just the one panel and not the other two, but if by some act of grace they found it, he would happily live with the mystery.

"If it's there," Lucas said, "what kind of condition do you think it's in?"

"Not good. In serious need of restoration." Timothy refused to expect better. What had preserved the existing seventy-three paintings was that the Conklins had always kept the old house in sound repair. Where they were headed, the buildings had been disintegrating for decades. To merely find a seventy-fourth would have to be the victory. "If it doesn't have wood rot, this'll be a happy day."

Lucas groaned.

"But art can survive a lot. Not just time. Bombings, wars. Earthquakes. Fires. Tornados. Sometimes it's like they *want* to survive."

This was more than groundless optimism. Timothy believed it. Had seen it. Had come to suspect that works of art could become suffused with the energy of their creators, which gave them a preconscious will to endure.

They pushed higher, and early morning loved the mountains. He lingered for the vistas that stole his breath as effectively as the climb, staring into the

far beyond, where the green slopes fell away and the hills rolled into the horizon in waves of hazy blue.

An hour along, Lucas gave him a conspirator's wink, then slipped a fat joint from the roll of his stocking cap and grinned as Nona huffed a sigh while he lit it. She told him to hang back and keep his distance, and double-timed until she'd put several yards between them.

"Not a fan," Lucas said, then leaned close and dropped his voice to a whisper. "That's what having your mom in prison for dealing meth does to you."

He spewed a cloud at the sky, then offered Timothy a friendly toke. If they'd been sitting around, maybe. Probably. Here and now, his lungs would punish him for it. He begged off, with regrets.

"I wouldn't have sparked up if I didn't know how she'd react. It's for privacy. She doesn't like to hear me talking like I'm about to." Lucas kept his voice low. "Cecil's art...this may sound strange, but it fills me with hope on a whole different level than whatever cash flow it might bring in. Does that make sense?"

"Honestly? Not yet."

Lucas snickered. "Well, I had a little herbal breakfast before you came up the hill, so you'll have to bear with me. See...what it is...I used to think land was the most indestructible thing there was. It's the planet, it just goes on." He drew in another epic lungful, held it, let it go. "Shows you how much I knew as a dumb kid. If you can kill a mountain for the coal, blow the top off it and rip the guts out of what's left, you can do pretty much anything you want to the land and there's nothing it can do to fight back."

They walked and squirrels scattered ahead of their passage and Lucas squinted with the effort of pulling his thoughts together.

"Too many people around here, they've lost themselves inside a lifetime of Dominion theology. They may not know the term, but they've got the principles down cold. Go back some generations, our ancestors had it right. They saw themselves as stewards of the earth. Now it's all about how God gave them dominion over everything, so they've got every right to do whatever they want with it."

Up ahead, Nona glanced back with a look of sympathy. *Want me to call him off?* Timothy waved that he was fine. *Suit yourself.*

“It’s going to take a lot more than good ideas and fresh energy to turn this region around, is what I’m saying. Up and down Appalachia, you’ve never seen people more resistant to change, more scared of it. And scared turns people mean. They’re never going to come around.”

He walked and smoked and his face grew more resolute.

“There’s a guy in our group, he made the parallel with science. Did you ever hear the saying that science advances funeral to funeral?”

“No.”

“It was an observation by another physicist around Einstein’s time. A new truth doesn’t win out by convincing its opponents it’s right. They’re too entrenched, even when it’s obvious how wrong they are. The truth just has to outlive them, wait for them to clear out of the way, until what’s left are the people who grow up familiar with it.”

Timothy was beginning to understand why Nona didn’t like to hear him speak like this. Lucas may have been right, but he was still talking about a great die-off.

“I find it daunting even on the best days. But getting back to Cecil’s work...that’s what gives me hope. There’s something eternal up here and he knew it. He felt it. He was tapped into it. He may have been one of the few that ever has.”

Timothy supposed this was what you got when you crossed youthful idealism with anger and a sense of futility. And weed.

“People are lazy. They look at paintings like those, and the conclusion they jump to is that Cecil was trying to purge something out of himself. They never think he might’ve been trying to connect with something beyond him. I don’t see those paintings as coming from a place of fear. I look at them and what I see is *awe*. It’s like he was on a first-name basis with something everybody else could only hear whispering in the wind.”

Timothy couldn’t let this go unchallenged. “It’s always risky to speculate on an artist’s motives. I’ve seen too many pompous asses caught with their pants down when they stood with the artists right in front of them, telling them what they intended.”

Which sounded good, anyway. But could he *always* say that? He couldn’t think of a single painter whose work hung in his gallery who wasn’t fueled by some sort of nostalgia. They had only ever confirmed what he’d guessed already.

Lucas snuffed out the joint on a tree trunk and tucked the rest back into his stocking cap. "Spend a week up here, no agendas but an open mind, and see what it does to you. The holy rollers and the Bible thumpers, they'll tell you they're the ones who brought religion in. But if you're even halfway paying attention, you can't miss it that there's older things in these hills than crosses. It's why I've been spending whatever weekends I can up at the old house. I like the time by myself. I like the solitude. Plus it gives me a place to practice the banjo without bothering Nona."

"I didn't know you played."

"It's debatable. Nona says she never thought anyone could make a banjo sound anything other than happy until she heard me."

"Sad banjo?" Nona called back to them. At some point they'd forgotten to murmur. He wondered how much she'd heard. "It's not a feat to take pride in!"

Lucas grinned at her, bright and adoring, as if nothing she could say would ever sting. Even with the beard, he looked like the boy he still was. It was a sweet thing to see, and Timothy remembered that feeling, too.

"But mostly," Lucas went on, "I come up here looking for what Cecil found. Maybe all it needs is a wake-up call. Somebody else paying attention for a change."

"How will you know when you find it? What's that look like?"

They trekked along the path, like a faded scar striped over the hills, still nowhere near the crest. He'd never felt so small beneath the risen sun.

"I don't know about looks," Lucas said. "But awestruck banjo, that's got to be quite a sound."

"Well, if you've got to know, you've got to know. Like I said, sometimes the noise of Cecil working and carrying on up there would drift down the hill, and us kids, we'd dare each other to go have a look, and always lose our nerve before we got all the way. The one time we didn't, it's 'cause we heard singing. Real pretty singing. It wasn't him, it was her. Olivia. That's why we didn't run, we wanted to hear the singing better. Or we did until we could make out the words. I never did forget this part:

“I’ll bring you the birds from out of the sky,
I’ll leave you bones and feathers.
I’ll call up the worms from the heart of the earth,
I’ll call down the stars and their winds of rebirth,
and we’ll find our way back home together.

“That’s why I didn’t want to get into it. I was always taught you never say an unkind word about a woman. But now that it’s out, I ask you: What kind of fit lullaby is that for a mother to sing to her babe in arms?”

They crested the ridge around midmorning. Downhill went faster, putting them in Broadwater Hollow shortly before noon. It sounded like plenty of time, but they had none to waste if they didn’t want to finish their return by flashlight. And he didn’t. He ached already, and that was going to be enough of a challenge.

The settlement wasn’t far, once the bottom of the slope leveled off into a wide valley strewn with creek-fed trees bunched into copses and groves. It was a ghost town gone to seed, a tumbledown collection of shanties and shacks, clapboards and cabins, falling apart one plank at a time. There may have been a central road, but that appeared the extent of urban planning, its residents having built wherever they pleased. Most had seemed to prefer a wide berth of their neighbors.

“Where do we even start?” Lucas said. “We need a system.”

“Down that way.” Nona pointed south. “There’s a layout to it, it just doesn’t jump out at you. If you looked straight down from above, you’d see it stretched out like a stringbean with a bend.”

“I don’t suppose you know which house Olivia came from,” Timothy said.

She shook her head no. “Not a clue. Lost in the mists of time, that knowledge.”

They made their way to the southern end, then progressed north house by house, trespassers in rooms that hadn’t known a human presence in

decades. Weeds exploited every crevice and crack. He didn't want to think how many spiders were just out of sight, how many shiny beetles wriggled in the crumbles of rotten wood. The more derelict places were broken open to the air, holding a dry, sunbaked smell. The sturdier ones, shaded and better enclosed, felt as damp and cool as caves. Either way, they all belonged to the landscape now, as much a part of it as the trees and creeks and briars.

The farther along they got, the more it seemed a fool's errand. Some houses had been cleaned out entirely, nothing left but the walls. Others held the last frayed threads of lives long over, from bedding and blankets shredded by time, to cast iron cookware gone ochre with rust.

The weight of neglect and decay grew heavy. Timothy couldn't help but dwell on what it had been like to live in this place through its decline, no births for years, just neighbors dropping one by one. The last ten, the final five, three, two, one. Who buried the last corpse? Nobody, he feared, and gauged the possibility of finding a bed full of bones, unless scavengers had dragged the corpse away in disarticulated pieces.

It was bad enough finding the birds, six so far, strange little tableaux on rotting logs and porches and, now, windowsills. Crows and blue jays and catbirds and more, they appeared to have died where they'd settled—desiccated husks now, all skeletons and ragged feathers, empty eye sockets and silent beaks. They seemed recent, weeks or months old, and nothing that human hands had left behind. Still, he'd never seen birds that looked as though they had died standing.

"Maybe they got stuck," Lucas said. "You notice how they're all on the same sort of stuff? That lichen or fungus or whatever it is? Maybe it's sticky."

"Well then, don't go touching it," Nona told him.

Lucas snapped off a twig and prodded at the growth that lined the windowsill and ran down the shack's outer wall to the grass. Green as an unripe pumpkin, veined with threads of yellow and orange, it seemed both dense and pliable, but left the twig uncaught.

"Or maybe it's like Velcro, if you've got bird feet." With a grin, he nodded down at Nona's shoes.

"Leave it be. You want a botany lesson, come back on your own time."

“Mycology. Not botany. Mycology.” Lucas tossed the twig aside and peered at the dried-out carcass. “It looks like something Cecil might have made, if he’d had more a mind for sculpture.”

Timothy only half heard them, his gaze rapt not on the carcass, but the shapeless growth beneath it. He had seen this shade of orange before. Whether by coincidence or design, it had permeated the direst of Cecil’s visions.

They kept going, and all they found were more shells that had once been birds. Timothy didn’t know if they seemed more plentiful because there really were in greater numbers toward the north, or because he and Nona and Lucas were primed to see them now. Whatever phenomenon had killed them had been going on for some time. The closer they looked, the more they were apt to spot flattened jumbles of weathered bones and tufts of feathers, their vanes and fluff decayed from the shaft.

And he had seen this orange before.

Lucas looked as discouraged and unnerved as any of them. “If there was any way to get a truck in here, I’d be wondering if some company hadn’t been using this valley as a chemical dump.”

The shadows had swung hard to the east and they were taking a snack break when Nona spotted it through distant trees: an edifice to the west, taller than any of the others. It would have been more evident in late autumn, with the limbs stripped of leaves, but here in springtime it hid, and hid well.

As they drew closer, they realized all she’d seen was the pyramidal roof of a belfry, jutting between a break in high branches. At ground level, the headstones of a cemetery mingled with maples and sycamores.

If it wasn’t the oldest country church he’d ever seen, it was by far the most decrepit. It slumped, the roof sagging in the middle like a swayback horse. Windows and doorways hung askew, wrenched from rectangles into trapezoids, and its bent walls were laced with ivy. Age and the elements had nibbled at its shingles, gaps in the roof showing rafters like ribs in the side of a rotting carcass.

After they’d stopped to absorb the sight, Lucas was first to move again.

Nona crossed her arms. “If the place falls in on you, don’t expect us two to dig your sorry butt out.”

“Deal,” Lucas said, then planted a stomping kick into the wall by the doorway. The building responded with a dull bang from its core. After a few moments of nothing worse, he was satisfied enough to step inside.

“Tetanus shot a year ago and he thinks he’s immortal,” Nona muttered at the building, then turned to Timothy. “Can you think of one good reason why that painting of Cecil’s would be inside here?”

“Actually, I can. One.”

As for *good*, though, no. He could envision nothing good about it.

They followed Lucas through the doorway, to the cool and musty interior.

Even when in use, clean and cared for, this would have been the most primitive house of worship he’d ever seen. The pews were simple benches made of split logs, the toppled pulpit shaped by chisel, saw, and adze. The detritus of dry leaves suited them; they all still looked like part of the forest.

Lucas had halted in the middle of the sanctuary, staring past the pulpit. Their shoes crunched on grit as they joined him, the floorboards clocking hollow beneath them.

So the painting had been here all along.

And he’d been right: He could find no good in *why*.

This was no longer a holy place, if it ever had been, not by any definition of the word that would have satisfied them on the other side of the mountain. The prejudice he’d heard on Nona’s interviews ran too deep for that. But a sanctified place? A consecrated place? Yes, it might have been that. And on its own terms, maybe still was.

“I don’t get it,” Lucas whispered. “Why would it be here?”

“You said the other two pieces reminded you of Bosch. A lot of those old triptychs were painted as altarpieces for churches.” Timothy looked at the sight in front of them, as revolting as it was, still trying to make sense of it—of what these people had *believed*. “No different here.”

“We’re never getting it out of that mess.”

“Not today, we’re not. With the right tools, maybe.” It sounded hopeful, but he feared Lucas was on the mark. This was a never.

Because he had seen this orange before.

And the panel had already been claimed.

Lucas seemed to deflate. “I can’t even tell where the painting ends and...”

“And that godawful fungus begins,” Nona finished.

Pale orange, even creamy, the color of sherbet threaded with veins of yellow—the color would’ve been soothing if it had belonged to something smaller, more pleasing to the eye. It had pushed up through the floor, squeezed in through the wall, climbed over the windowsills—a formless mass that looked as solid as a lava flow cooled into igneous rock. Here it bulged; there it was stacked in scalloped tiers.

It wasn’t moving, but to stare at it for long was to be fooled, to think you’d seen it pulsate. It was the same kind of growth they’d seen around the birds, but aged, mature. Befitting its size, its appetites were greater here. Near a deep buildup in the corner, a stag’s skull and shoulder jutted from the mass, tattered with the last of its rotted hide and twelve points to its spread of antlers.

Nothing about this mad, unchecked growth suggested it should have sentience. It appeared only as a gigantic tumor that had burst from the earth. Yet it seemed to have been drawn to the painting. Embracing it. Cradling it...

Drawn to its own likeness, to engulf it.

Timothy stepped close for a better look. Through the filth of decades, Cecil’s work endured, painted mostly in orange hues that matched the growth it was mired in. He recalled the figure finding its way across the other panels, a solitary seeker climbing, then descending...and here was its destiny. There were secrets here, the fungus swallowing the panel from the bottom and both sides, but in what remained visible Timothy could make out the suggestion of a large face, crying out in what could have been either agony or ecstasy...assuming a human face could rebel so completely against the tyranny of symmetry and the mandate of having a single mouth.

He imagined the triptych complete, and the simple story it told:

Ascent. Descent. *And this.*

Lucas pulled absently, painfully, at his beard. “Why just the one? Why didn’t the other two pieces get brought over?”

“Because maybe the artist hung himself before he could do it,” Nona whispered. “Because maybe the rest got locked away before anybody else could, either.”

Lucas was first to leave, tromping out in a bewildered and angry surrender. It wasn’t hard to guess why. He’d wanted a prophet and gotten a madman who had broken a little at a time.

Nona hadn't budged. "Is this what Cecil was working toward all along, you think? Was it all leading to this? Because I don't know what to make of this."

"I can't answer that. All I can say is he didn't do any better work than those three panels." It wasn't enough. She needed more. "The rest is whatever you decide it is. If we don't know by now, we never will. You might as well settle on what you like best."

She continued to stare at the painting and the repulsive altar grown around it. "More like what I hate least."

Outside again, they had to call out for Lucas, and found he'd strayed around to the far side of the church, deeper into the valley. It was everywhere over here, pustules of pale orange erupting through the ground, crescents of it scaling the bases of trees. As far as they could see, the landscape was dotted with dark lumps, birds in every state of decomposition, and squirrels, and other small things that crept by night or scurried by day.

And the timeless wind breathed through the trees, the same as it ever had.

"It just goes on and on," Lucas said. "You know what this is, don't you?"

Timothy didn't. The way Nona was looking at him, she didn't either.

"They find them every now and then. I first learned about them last year. I'm thinking this must be another." He pointed at one misshapen furuncle of orange, then another, and another. "None of these are separate growths. They're all from the same one. They're all connected. Most of it's underground. The bits we see? That's just what's popping up."

If so, then they hadn't merely been detouring around it. They'd been walking *over* it. For hours.

"There's one in Michigan," Lucas went on. "Another in Oregon that covers a couple square miles. They say that one's the biggest living thing on earth. Maybe the oldest, too. Eight thousand years, some guess. As big and old as those sequoia redwoods are, they're not a patch on something like that." He shrugged. "Supposed to be good eating, too, the mushrooms that one sends up."

"You go on and slice you off a chunk of this one if you want," Nona told him. "I'll pass."

"But if that's what people were doing over here, that might explain a lot. Maybe it makes you see visions. Maybe this stuff was to them what peyote

is to Indians. What if that was the real story behind Cecil's art?" Disappointment was creeping into his voice. "What if he got turned onto it and he was just tripping balls the whole time?"

Nona huffed, fists on her hips. "Then I guess that would explain why you seem to think you have so much in common with him, that he's more your relative than he is mine."

Lucas protested and they bickered, but Timothy tuned them out, hearing less the more they kept at it. He tried to grasp the potential antiquity of such a discovery and found it elusive—a living thing born as far back in time from the pyramids as the pyramids were from today.

Could it ever die? It would take a cataclysm to kill it. Over on the other side of the mountain, their houses of worship promised eternal life. Here, they'd found it.

It did not feel like a blessing.

Inside him, like a sore tooth, throbbed an impulse to tread carefully, beneath notice. The atmosphere of a redwood forest was nothing like this. He'd visited several; he knew. Their skyscraper trees exuded their age with a benign, indifferent majesty. They seemed to bind all time together, even as they stood outside it, and left you sorry when it came time to depart them.

This, here? It felt malignant. There was nothing of symbiosis about its place in the environment. It felt greedy and grasping and parasitical—as though, given enough time, this growth would choke every bit of life from the land, then spread beyond to take more.

How could anyone have revered such a thing?

Timothy knelt for a closer look at one of the dead crows perched on a patch of the fungus, and saw what appeared to be thin tendrils twined about its splayed feet and claws. He began to see the entire valley as a Venus flytrap, a pitcher plant, a sundew...plants that had taken the path of carnivores.

This particular mechanism, though—he'd never heard of such a thing. It was either something new, or so vastly old it had gone extinct everywhere but here.

Or perhaps it had always been one of a kind.

When he rose with a grunt and an ache in his knees, he saw that Nona and Lucas had strayed into the church's cemetery. By the tone of their squabble,

it sounded that she was ready to head for home and trying to convince him it was time.

When Timothy rejoined them, Nona flashed him a look of exasperation as if she were a moment away from leaving Lucas to the bones.

“He’s looking for Cecil’s grave,” she said. “Figures he can’t forgive himself if he doesn’t pay his respects.”

“I didn’t know Cecil was buried here.”

“Supposed to be. They wouldn’t have him on the other side. I guess they were like Catholics when it came to suicide. Gotta keep the riff-raff out of your heaven.”

Lucas paced among the headstones. They tilted like snagged teeth, weathered slabs scarcely thicker than wooden signboards. The graves were scattered among trees and clearings alike, laid out with as little discernible plan as their occupants’ homes had been. The corpses of birds watched from overhead, lining the branches now.

“Can you even read the names anymore?” Nona shouted to Lucas.

“The newer ones, yeah. They’re legible enough.”

“Then read faster. You’ve got five more minutes before you’ll be looking at our two’s backs.” Nona tapped her bare wrist and pointed at Timothy’s. Her expression was unmistakable: *Start timing. I mean it.*

Lucas scurried from another grave to the next, and glanced up with the closest thing to genuine annoyance Timothy had seen on him all day.

“If faster’s what you want, how about the two of you take a gander at some of these your—”

Then he was gone. Straight down, as if he’d stepped off a platform into empty space below. With the sound of an impact and a grunt and curse, he at least hadn’t gone far. They rushed over and found he was sitting in a grave that had collapsed beneath him, coughing in a dusty haze.

“If you tell me you broke your leg,” Nona said, “I swear to God—”

“My leg is fine, thank you for your concern.”

Relenting with a sigh, she moved to help him. Without thinking, Timothy shot his arm out to block her, to keep her back.

“Let that settle a minute,” he whispered. “I don’t think that’s dust.”

Nona glared as if she suspected him a fool, as well. “In a dusty old hole, what else would it be?”

“Spores.”

For a moment, he wished he hadn't told her, because it was like watching a little piece of her die inside. She got his meaning, his fear.

"Lucas, haul your butt out of there!" Nona said. "Right now."

He wallowed in it, starting to laugh. Some people didn't take long to find the humor in falling in a grave. "It's okay. There's not even a body." He choked out another coughing fit. "Somebody must have put the headstone in the wrong place."

Timothy stepped closer, carefully, poised to slap the crook of his elbow over his mouth to filter his breathing. The sides of the hole were in distinct layers. Only the top few inches was soil. Beneath that, things turned a grubby orange, as if the fungus had been used as a burial vault. Toward the foot of the grave, he saw the part of the hollow that hadn't collapsed...and in it, a crusted husk, as empty and intact as the shell left behind by a cicada. It still bore the resemblance of something molded, a cavity that had formed around a pair of legs.

When Lucas noticed it too, nothing else seemed to matter. He ran his fingertips along its curves and contours, tracing the line of one thigh. He leaned onto an elbow and peered inside the hollow, toward where the feet would have been.

"Shit," he whispered.

Timothy covered his mouth and held a deep breath and flattened himself near the head of the grave, trying to see further into the hollow space. It tapered, yes. But instead of closing off at the feet, it flared and widened again, seeming not to end—a tube, a conduit that led past any reach of daylight, on and on beneath the ground.

Lucas pointed into it. "Do you hear that?"

They had to tell him no.

"You don't hear that." He sounded mystified. "How do you not hear it?"

Timothy had to breathe, and stood again, backing away from the hole before he whooshed out the stale air and drew in the fresh. Graves surrounded them, haphazard and random to the eye—dozens, a hundred, two hundred and more—but now he saw them as he hadn't before. They conformed to a pattern, of that he was certain. Scrape away the soil and they would see how orderly and deliberate it truly was.

They would follow the lobes and avenues of fungus.

"What are we supposed to be hearing?" Nona asked.

This amorphous thing beneath them—could it see? Was it aware? Might it think? Did it have ears to hear, to listen and interpret? Or was it beyond such a limited palette of senses?

“I thought I knew the difference between singing and screaming.” Lucas clambered from the hole as if a spell were broken and he couldn’t vacate it fast enough. “But *that*...”

The sound swelled up after him, rising from a whisper to a cacophony, roaring from the hole as from a megaphone. It was a sound of whirlwinds, of discordant choirs with boiled tongues. It was the sound of a leviathan that absorbed eons and breathed nightmares. There was no single source to it. The collapsed grave was only the first. Within seconds it was rising all around them from a thousand dirt-clogged throats.

Moments later, the earth itself was in turmoil. It stirred underfoot, rippling like the hide over the muscles of a horse trying to shake off a biting fly. Across the length and breadth of the hollow, flocks of live birds erupted from the swaying trees as dead ones shook free and pattered to the ground in ragged bundles of feather and bone.

And they ran. Ran because there was nothing else to do, even though no place seemed safe to run *to*. Ran as though crossing the back of a slumbering giant roused by wrath and dreams. Ran, and Timothy was astonished how well he could keep up with people less than half his age.

They slowed only when they reached the head of the trail linking the west side to the east, and the slope began to rise. By now the earth had settled, the valley’s ageless calm restored. Looking down on its secrets and sprawl, he found it all the more eerie for its silence, as the birds began to return. It could bide its time again—another day, another thousand years, both might be the same.

Things beneath the earth could always endure time better than those above it.

“I understand that urge of yours to stay put here. I really do. I had to fight it myself, but the best decision I ever made was to live most of my life elsewhere. Coming back to lay my head here for whatever days I have left,

I'm at least making an informed choice. I hope you'll give it some serious thought while you still have that bright-eyed look about you. Once you lose that, every year that goes by makes it that much harder to get it back. Women especially. We're the ones who always seem to end up wearing the heavier chains. And I understand that urge to find out what you can of who you came from. But the better part of that is knowing when to stop digging, because my god, why would you ever want to bear that much sorrow?"

Timothy found something broken about trying to resume normal, everyday life. It wouldn't let him. Not this time.

He had wandered this suffocating territory once before. Lose a spouse, and the days stretch on as if they will always smolder with grief. And so it was after Radha. Until the smoke cleared and the sun rose on a new normal—not as good, but he could live with it, and imagine better.

This was worse, in its way. Nothing felt true anymore. He envied the young their resilience. He could imagine their souls were like the bones of children—softer and more pliable, easier to heal after a break and good as new once they did.

Lynette, the daughter he'd not seen for two years—he could no longer think of her as still running from grief. Every time they'd spoken, she sounded happy. They just spoke less and less. If he had raised her to the point of no longer needing him, wasn't there a victory in that? He'd been lying to himself. The truth was, she had found a life she wanted. Some people found it on the other side of a mountain; others, the far side of an ocean.

And Nona? She *sounded* resilient, at least. She had a semester to complete, final exams to anticipate. This was *her* life, and she was back at it.

He supposed Lucas was too. No harm done. Although when Timothy brought him up, Nona seemed eager to change the subject. He could take a hint.

And Timothy himself? He had the Conklin Collection to keep him occupied, but it wasn't enough. In some ways, proximity to the seventy-

three paintings made matters worse. He was the one left with the reminders now, face to face with the malady behind them. He wanted to call it madness, but knew better. If this was madness, it wasn't his, nor even Cecil's. It was a madness that had anchored itself into the world, hiding in plain sight, and he was only now waking up to it.

So he wandered the gallery at night after everyone had left, eyeing all the trite visions of a rural homeland he'd hoped was out there waiting, if only he could find the road to the right village, right farmhouse, right neighbors. A place where nobody was in enough of a hurry they had to run red lights and kill whoever was in their way.

When the blurred vision began, he thought it was stress. When it continued, he thought it was his eyes' way of telling him they'd seen enough of this twee bullshit. A more dramatic man would've splashed it all with gasoline and put a match to it.

Instead, he just turned the lights out when he left.

The Conklin Collection deserved better, at least.

So when Nona called to ask about getting one back, after he'd had the paintings for a month, it came as an unexpected relief. Like a valve to release a bit of that pressure building in his left eye socket and the prognosis from the ophthalmologist.

"Which painting?" he said.

He heard the rattling of papers on Nona's end. "This inventory you left me, the way you've got it described, it should be number fifty-two. Would that be a problem?"

He jotted the number on the nearest notepad. He kept everything on his right side now. "It's still yours. Nothing changes that. If you want one back, that's your prerogative."

"It's not exactly for me. Lucas, he, uh..." She trailed off as if she'd lost the words.

And that was how he knew. *It's both of us. It's growing inside both of us.*

"How soon can you get it shipped here, you think?"

He thought awhile, until Nona felt compelled to ask if he was still there.

"Give me a couple of days," he said. "I'll bring it there myself."

“Sometimes it takes moving away to recognize just how close-minded and prejudicial people can be about anyone who’s the least bit different. They used to tell all kinds of stories about that poor man. If half of them had a grain of truth, I’d be surprised. Back when Cecil’s so-called friends and neighbors started floating his name about for those killings north of Buell and across into Drummond Township, it was only on account of how he looked, how he didn’t fit the norm. My father was a sheriff’s deputy in those days. He knew what was what. He said there was no way a human being could’ve done what was done to those bodies. There was no way a man could’ve crossed the mountain in the time it all happened. There was no trail there, just steep hillsides as rugged as they come. The nearest they could figure is that it was a rabid bear. What possible motive would Cecil have had, anyway? They were just hunters. I always thought that was why he tossed that rope over the limb. He knew what people were like. Scared and mean. He knew things were only going to get worse.”

It was May now, and as Timothy wound his way through them, the mountains had never looked greener. Except for that blighted region killed by men and machines and explosives. It could be green again someday, but it would never stand as tall.

When he arrived in Buell, they eyed him on the way to the Conklin place, everywhere from porches to the post office, as if he would need more than a couple of trips back and forth to earn their trust. He didn’t blame them. He supposed it had nearly always been people with out-of-state plates who rolled in with money and promises, and left with another piece of the future.

Saturday again. The morning had grown late by the time he pulled up before the new house. Nona hurried out to greet him like a relative, with the kind of hug he hadn’t felt in too long. Then she pulled back to clutch him at arms’ length as she peered at the circular bandage taped over his left eye—gauze padding under a protective outer shell of white plastic.

“What’s this about? What have you done to yourself?”

“Scratched the cornea. Just clumsiness.” He patted her hand. “I poked myself with the tip of a conservator brush.”

“You shouldn’t be driving half blind. This far, especially. That’s a long old drive. They’ll scrape you up because you never saw the train coming.”

Even with one eye, the sight of her brightened the day. The moment spirited him back to when he’d first seen her, something out of time about her, thinking she seemed like someone who belonged in the gallery’s paintings rather than looking at them. Now he knew better. Nona belonged *here*. In the best possible version of here.

Turnabout. This time he was the one toting a flat satchel.

She gave his wrist a gentle squeeze. “You stubborn thing. I kept telling you, you didn’t have to bring it yourself.”

“Yes I did.”

“It’ll mean the world to Lucas. Give him something new to look at up there. I don’t why he had his heart set on this one, but that’s the one it had to be.”

Nona wore the fraught appearance of someone struggling to stitch a better face on a deplorable situation. He gave her another hug, the kind maybe they’d both gone too long without. When she gazed up the hill, he recognized the look of someone refusing to let herself cry.

“The last thing I ever wanted in life was to play nursemaid to a man complaining how much his bones ached,” she said. “Now all I wish is he’d let me in to see him. He just wants me to leave the food on the porch and skedaddle back down here.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Timothy said, and almost kissed her on the cheek without thinking, pure reflex, because in the right light, at the right angle, she looked—but no.

“You’re a good man, Tim,” she called to his back as he paced down the footpath along the house, toward the slopes. “There’s a shortage of that.”

He carried it with him the rest of the way, the only thing he ever had that seemed to lighten the load.

“Never thought I’d be the last subject on my own recordings. Never thought I’d be interviewing myself. This is what you call coming full circle, right here. I’ve been feeling bad because of the tone I took with Lucas over in the hollow, telling him he thought Cecil’s more his relative than mine. I don’t know why I treat him that way some days. There’s just things in me that have to come out, and he’s the nearest to hand anymore. I will say that getting spooked makes you snappish with the last people you should snap at. It kills me to say it, but maybe he’s right. Now he’s right. Lucas didn’t cross the mountain that way, but I’m getting scared that’s the way he came back.”

Up at the old house, Timothy stomped across the porch and banged on the door as Nona never would. “Federal Express! I need your signature for this package!”

After several moments, Lucas cracked open the door and peered out and broke into a bright and delighted grin. “You’re sneakier than you look,” he said, then swung the door fully open.

There seemed more of Lucas now in every way. He stood an inch taller, or two. Possibly more, if it wasn’t for the way he slouched. His chest seemed wider, his narrow face starting to fill in. His voice had begun to roughen, as if coming from a deeper place. He knew pain, though, leaning on a stout length of hickory he used as a walking stick to help him clomp across the floor.

“Yeah,” Lucas said after letting him stare. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way.”

Timothy had no words. He’d known something had gone wrong, obviously. He’d guessed, and wasn’t far off. He’d anticipated, but wasn’t prepared. This was still Lucas, but an alternate version of him. A Lucas sired, perhaps, by a different father.

“That bandage there. Tell me that’s a coincidence, it’s got nothing to do with...”

“The spores?” Timothy snorted. “I should be so lucky.”

“Well, shit.” Lucas led him inside and shut the door. “You knew something was going on right away. I saw you keeping Nona back from that hole. I caught that.” He nodded. “Quick thinking. I’m glad someone was.”

Timothy shook his head, too much credit where credit wasn’t due. “All I was thinking about was a lung infection.”

Even then, there had been omens of worse things to dread. The way Lucas had heard that unearthly subterranean roar moments before he and Nona had? Even that early, it seemed as if Lucas, like the painting in the church, had been...claimed.

“At least now I’ve got a pretty good idea what happened to Cecil. What he got dosed with.” Using the stick as support, Lucas stumped across the floor and lowered onto the cot that was starting to look too small for him. “For all I know, I got it worse. Dumbass. Sit there in an open grave huffing it in.”

Open grave? *Empty* grave. Once more, Timothy put the pieces together in his head, and he’d come up with no other way to fit them: that Lucas, as Cecil before him, was going through a transfiguration meant for the dead, which perhaps made something entirely different of the living.

As for himself...

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I genuinely am.”

“Don’t be.” Lucas grinned. “Haven’t you figured me out yet? I’m the type that always needs to be a part of something bigger.” He leaned closer to inspect the ocular bandage with puzzled concern. “But you, I don’t get it, you were careful.”

“Not careful enough. I thought if I wasn’t breathing them, there was nothing to worry about. I still got too close.” With a fingertip, Timothy mimed something drifting through the air, a swirling, random path that ended at his eye. He tapped the hardshell bandage. “The ophthalmologist thinks it’s an aggressive tumor.”

“You say that like you don’t.”

“I don’t want to talk about my eye now.”

Lucas nodded, acquiescing. “You didn’t tell Nona any of this, did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Good.” Lucas leaned on his hickory stick as if, even though he was sitting on the cot, he still needed support. “Aren’t we a pair?” He pointed with the stick at the ballistic nylon carrying case that Timothy had set

against the wall by the door. “Then how about we get that out of the bag and on a wall where it belongs.”

Grateful to be moving on, Timothy ripped the Velcro tabs apart and slid the painting free. Lucas pointed toward a hammer and nails, so he did the honors, hanging it in easy view from the cot. Lucas lit up as if nothing could have pleased him more.

The painting was among those Cecil had done on purloined canvas, the only one that might be called a portrait. But he couldn’t know. He allowed for the possibility it was Cecil’s rough version of the foliate head of Green Man iconography, a savage merger of bark and beard, leaves and hair, widened eyes and a howling dark maw.

Lucas stared with approval at the face baying back at him. “There we go. Now I got me an audience.” He turned back to Timothy. “The bit of song that old man on one of Nona’s interviews remembered? I’ve been trying to put that to music, give it a tune again.”

He exchanged his hickory stick for the banjo, and picked out a stark, slowly rolling motif that left space for the words.

“I’ll bring you the birds from out of the sky,
I’ll leave you bones and feathers.
I’ll call up the worms from the heart of the earth,
I’ll call down the stars and their winds of rebirth,
and we’ll find our way back home together.”

He let the last plucked notes ring and die. “How’s it sound?”

“Sad.” Timothy remembered Nona’s jab on the trail to Broadwater Hollow. “Sad banjo. How *do* you do it?”

“It’s not the instrument, it’s the notes.” He set the banjo aside again. “That part, I think it must’ve been the chorus. That’s why the old boy remembered it. He heard it repeated and it stuck. I’ve been working on adding verses, too, but that might take awhile. I don’t know enough yet.”

At first Timothy thought he meant musically. But no—Lucas meant something deeper, darker, older. Something beneath the earth with neither head nor tail, measured in acres and weighing untold tons. Where it came from, where it led. Lucas had much to learn. They both did.

“You will,” Timothy said, the worst promise he’d ever made.

Lucas nodded. "It's coming in its own time." He pointed his stick at the newly hung painting. "I know enough to give that a name. Even though Cecil didn't see fit to title them, that one I'm going to call *Enkidu*. I don't know if he'd approve. But I think he'd understand."

Timothy shook his head, vaguely ashamed. He was supposed to know so much more about everything by now.

"Enkidu was the Wild Man in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. One part human, two parts beast." Again, that heedless grin. "And here my dad kept telling me that liberal arts curriculum wasn't going to teach me anything that mattered."

Timothy peered at the mad, howling face, so vivid it seemed as if the man behind it was going to spring from the canvas. "What happened to him?"

"Enkidu? He got civilized by a woman. Later on, the gods kill him because he killed the guardian of the forest." Now Lucas joined the staredown with it. "I can't stop thinking this was a self-portrait. Cecil looking at his own future. Or maybe, depending on when he painted this, he was already living it." Lucas waited until he had Timothy's full attention again. "Nona's not ready to admit it. She might never be. But you and me, I think we both know what Cecil did. I think we both know he's what those hunters met up with. That's the reason he hung himself. He wasn't ready to go where the change was taking him. He took too much pride in trying to be a civilized man."

"That's a bit of a reach," Timothy said. Ever reluctant to interpret an artist's motives. The tendency would never die, and he was sick of it.

"You're not the one dreaming my dreams. Pass a few of my nights, then we'll talk. But me? I'm not proud. Told you I never wanted to leave these hills."

He had nothing to say to that. Even if he did, Lucas looked in no mood to hear it.

"This thing inside...I don't think it has all of me. I don't think it ever will. The question is, how much *me* will be left when it's done?" He hunched forward on the cot, massaging both knees. "Even if it's just one-third, that's enough." When he looked up, savagery simmered at the back of his eyes. "I told you these mountains needed a cleaning out, too."

"You've got years before it comes to that. Cecil obviously did."

Lucas shook his head. "I don't think so. I think it's coming on faster with me. Cecil, I suspect he fought it. Remember those old folks saying how he'd piss and moan and carry on up here? Me...I'm not fighting it." Now he only had eyes for the windows and the door. "Enkidu never should've killed the guardian of the forest. He should've joined him. That's what too much civilizing does to you." Lucas lightened, the newborn beast easing back into its cave. "You know what I like about you? You listen. My dad, he never listens."

"He'll miss you, though. You have no idea how much he'll miss you."

"He had plenty opportunities to give me one." Lucas waved all that to the side, intent on leaving it there, then pointed at Timothy's feet. "You got your trail stompers on." His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. "Heading over the hill again, are you?"

Timothy admitted he was.

"Are you coming back?"

Timothy confessed that he had no idea.

Lucas pointed at his bandage. "Whatever's going on behind there, can't you have it cut out? You'd lose the eye, probably, but come on, nobody gives up from losing an eye."

Timothy glanced down at a coffee-stained mug, empty now, sitting on the floor by the cot. "Lob that over here at me." He pressed the palm of one hand over his right eye, so that he was in effect standing blind. "Don't tell me when, just do it."

Moments later, he snatched the silent mug out of the air with his free hand.

"No way," Lucas whispered. "That did *not* just happen."

"That thing over there...I think there's an intelligence to it. To every part of it. I think it had enough awareness of where it landed on me that what it's doing now is growing its own idea of a sensory organ." Timothy tossed the mug back to him. "It's already grown back through the optic nerve, into my brain, my central nervous system. It's too late for operations."

"But it's still covered. How...?"

"I said sensory organ. I never said it was another eye."

Lucas looked appalled. And fascinated. "Do I even want to see it?"

"I don't know. Do you?" He waited. "It sees *you*."

Lucas had to think about it. "Okay."

Timothy stepped close to him and leaned over, closer still, peeling away the two strips of white tape holding the bandage to his cheek, then levering it up like a lid.

“Jesus god,” Lucas whispered. “I take it back. I’d say you got it worse than Cecil or me either one.”

Timothy lowered the bandage back into place.

“It’s those little curly bits sticking out all over that get me. Like those skinny roots you have to scrape off a fresh-dug carrot.” Lucas shuddered. “What all does it sense?”

Timothy smoothed the tape over his cheek again. “You weren’t even sure you wanted to look under here. I can tell you for certain you don’t want to know what it’s like looking *through* it.”

Now Lucas was the one who had no words. For the moment, he looked smaller.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” Timothy went on. “But I’d rather get it out of the way sooner than later. The worst thing I can imagine is letting this progress slowly. Not so much for my own sake as everyone around me. I don’t want to fight it either. There’s a part of me that’s already starting to like it.”

“Well. I get that.” Lucas found his bearings again. “But what about Nona? The collection? You made promises. Now you’re just going to leave her in the lurch?”

“It’s taken care of. Unless I’m there to stop it, in a week the gallery’s ownership will transfer to my associate director. And I’ve found a new curator for Cecil’s work. She’ll do as right by it as I ever could’ve.”

Lucas tugged at his thickening beard. “To Nona, this is all gonna come as bad news, and you’re leaving it to me to break it to her. Not cool.”

“Not necessarily. That’s taken care of too. There’s a letter and other documents in the glove box of my car. But there’s one thing you can do, if you would.”

Timothy dug into his pocket and set his car keys on a small table burdened with a scattering of books and dinnerware. Again, he spirited back to when Nona had first sought him out: *I got a hand-me-down truck I don’t trust more than thirty miles at a time.*

“Make sure she gets those. There’s a title transfer in the works, too. Plus a check with all the rest that should cover the first year of insurance, plates,

fees, things like that.”

“Nona in a Lexus.” Lucas shook his head in wonder. “That’ll take some getting used to.”

“You’re going to have to let her see you sooner or later, you know.”

“I will.” It seemed to be the only matter that caused him regrets. He pointed at the door. “I fight a battle with that lock every day. I *will*. Just... after the growing pains have passed, okay? After there’s a little less of me left to civilize.”

As Lucas shifted on his cot, pensive and wistful, it felt settled between them—no more left to say and no need to pretend otherwise. Until he raised his head and looked Timothy in the eye.

“Let me see under there again,” he said. “I think I finally got it figured out what’s really going on here.”

“I had all these notions about Cecil in my head. I liked thinking I came from such a person. He wasn’t an easy fit anywhere he was, and he went his own way no matter what a bunch of judgmental busybodies had to say about it. But he can’t have been an easy man to live with. I see that now. There’s nothing to romanticize about it. I keep telling Lucas he needs to go to a doctor, get himself looked at, and he won’t budge on it. Says what’s a doctor going to do, this just needs to run its course. Let him stay laid up at the old house until he feels like coming out again. I tried telling him the price of that would be a doctor visit, but it didn’t go over well. He tells me not to go negative. That there’s this thing inside him now and he doesn’t know how much control he’ll have over it one day, so it’s not a good idea to make it mad, or leave it with bad associations of me. He doesn’t tell me this like he’s giving orders. He’s begging. Crying begging. He really believes this. It’s getting where I am too.”

And it made sense, the way Lucas laid it out. All that was known, all that he’d learned, all that he’d connected. Smart kid, really. Everything made a

ghastly kind of sense, perfect in its madness, in every aspect except *why*. But Timothy had learned to quit asking that two years ago.

When they said their goodbyes, it didn't feel like forever—that while neither of them could know precisely what the future brought, it wasn't impossible that their paths would cross again someday, and if it happened, maybe he and Lucas would even recognize each other.

In time, they both would belong to the land.

Still, as he picked up the trail again, he was weak, as he'd known he would be, even if it didn't show on the outside. Today's partings were the only moments he truly hated—his last entanglements with a world that brought you children to love, only to tear you asunder again. He departed feeling worse for Lucas than he did himself—this coming new existence the boy foresaw that he would have to endure alone, two parts beast and one part human, savage enough to live beyond guilt and cunning enough to be unkillable as he protected what was his.

Timothy made the long green climb in solitude, until halfway through the descent, when he began to feel less alone.

The valley sprawled below him in the busy silence of deep woods. To a lesser eye it would appear indifferent, neither welcoming nor repelling. He knew better, saw deeper, had begun to parse its secrets. If he'd only looked closer before, he might have seen that this was every imaginal landscape he'd ever wanted to step into and never leave. This was a place he could be one with, everywhere and nowhere. Absorbed, dispersed, and repurposed, his awareness flowing like sap between the trees.

In turn, the hollow knew one of its own.

Behind his bandage and its plastic shield, the fibrous new excrescence squirmed in eager recognition. There was no more need to hide it. He stripped the barrier away, then moved like a ghost down the trail.

Each step became a revelation. He could perceive orders of magnitude beyond what he could with his old, unaided eyes. The breadth of this majestic thing under the valley floor, the oceanic depth of it. Every lobe and length, every exploratory tendril, every tree-sized pseudopod it extended in search of more.

In all ways that mattered, it was a god.

Past homes and hovels and the scattered murders of flightless crows, he followed the lure of the church of those who'd gone before. He lingered by

the doorway to stare out across the cemetery and the haphazard teeth of its markers. He saw beneath, below, confirming what his heart knew already: that every grave was empty, with a conduit at its foot, leading down, down, down.

They were so far beneath everyday notice, these reborn worms in the heart of the earth, they might endure for eternity.

Inside, the church bore its woody scents of rot and growth like the perfume from a priestly censer. Down the aisle, then, to the altar this leviathan with a thousand self-grown throats had made to itself.

“I’m here,” he told it. As if it didn’t know.

He found it pleasing to the touch, something between flesh and bark that took the strengths of both. He studied the way it engulfed the painting, how it bulged here and slumped there—how had he not seen this before?—so much like a seat waiting for someone to occupy it.

He accepted its hospitality, and the sun traversed the sky.

After the first hour, he couldn’t have left it even if he’d wanted to. He knew why the birds chose not to fly away, lingering until it was no longer an option. Did they see themselves flying as high as eagles? Everything needed a dream of itself as greater than it was. It gave him that much. It gave him as much as it took, then gave a little more, for there was no way for it to know his mind without revealing more of its own.

Because everything had, as well, a need to be obliterated.

Everything had a need to serve.

As the sun sank beyond the hills, there was no longer any such dichotomy as darkness and light. Free of cities, free of towns, freed of the prohibitions of all that his senses were never meant to perceive, he could view the night for what it really was. Instead of concealing, it now revealed.

He was drawn to the biggest gap in the roof, where shingles had peeled and rafters sagged, stargazing from a deeper place than human eyes were able. He peered into the spaces between the stars, where webs of dark matter hung strewn between galaxies like the neurons of a brain. He saw rogue planets by the score, roaming the cold emptiness as if shunned by every sun, each but a single spore adrift in a process with eons yet to unfold.

This one he was on was no different, acrawl with sentient bacteria that had learned to walk. He saw it as it had been and as it had always been

destined to be, its fragile veneer of culture and commerce just one more chrysalid shell that would split and slough away to reveal the organism raging beneath.

It was too much. If he'd been blind to all these wonders before, it had still been a blessing. Yet the mass that had evicted his eye yearned for it, straining for union while its roots ran as deep as his spine.

He was torn, and the moon traversed the sky.

For hours he watched as someone he thought was named Timothy screamed into the night, and even he didn't know if it came from pain or regret or exultation.

The thousand throats joined him in a song of home—he intuited that much.

It was only near dawn that it opened up another, to take him to its bosom, and he understood how vast and far-reaching this home truly was, and how much room it had for more.

“Lucas thinks I don't know what's really going on, but I'm pretty sure I do. I keep going over it, just can't ever seem to work out to my satisfaction what's worse: Having every license in the world to become what you really are, even if it costs you everything else? Or getting left behind to watch yourself turn out the same as everybody you used to couldn't stand to be around for long? I don't know how to decide. Not when you only get to be wrong once.”

A season had passed, or maybe it was two, before the wild man came down from the hills. He kept to no fixed schedule, erratic and driven by impulses as random and inconsistent as the wind.

Nearly always, though, he brought bodies. Only very rarely were they still tenaciously alive. In the early days he carried them two at a time, but as the wild man continued to grow in strength and stature and daring, he was able to manage three. He would deposit them outside the church whose roof

sagged like a swayback horse, then he might be off again, obeying some call of trees and moss.

Or he might linger awhile, perhaps obeying an inner call, a need to sit awhile and share the sky and the stars and something close to memories.

The wild man said little. His tongue no longer seemed to like the taste of words. But the servant enjoyed his company anyway, and maybe even loved him, because they shared a history, he was certain of it, from a time when they both looked very different.

There—that was them: those flashes of recollection, a man and a boy in a shack, more cabin than house, the weathered gray of dense wood cured as hard as stone.

“I think I finally got it figured out what’s really going on here,” the boy said. “That day we were over in the hollow, when I told Nona no, it wasn’t botany she was thinking of, it was mycology? I didn’t just happen to know that. I’d studied up on it some. It wasn’t only weed I was interested in. I wanted to see if I could grow some shrooms. You know, magic mushrooms.”

The boy used a hickory stick to hobble across the floor to a table laden with the possessions he must have deemed important enough to gather here, in his isolation. He seized a book whose cover was a collage of close-ups of various mushrooms and fungi, and began to flip through it.

“The smaller things are, sometimes, the weirder they get.” He found the page he wanted and showed it to the man. “There. That’s what’s going on here.”

He brought him the bodies from out of the hills.

He left him the dead and the dying.

Whenever the wild man came through, the servant didn’t have to think about what to do next. He was simply compelled to do it, the knowledge as sure as breathing. He saw precisely where to dig, scooping away the soil, then hacking into the woody, fibrous tomb that was waiting, so he could lay them to rest and cover them up and let time send them on their way.

He had a fine collection of shovels and axes by now. It would be the pride of any farm. Anything and everything he could ever want or need...it was all out there on the other side of the mountains. He’d become an accomplished thief, and night was his ally, concealing him as it revealed the rest.

There was just one nagging thing he couldn’t understand.

Whenever the wild man left his cargo behind, it felt important to inspect them one by one, their faces and their hair. It made no sense. It served no purpose. But he did it anyway, as though he were looking for someone in particular, and a knot in his heart always loosened when he realized that, whoever they were, they weren't there.

On the page in the book in the cabin on the mountain was a picture of an ant with what appeared to be a twig caught on its head, a twig tipped with a prickly looking bulb. But on the scale of ants, even what resembled a twig would be tiny. So the man looked, but did not see. He was supposed to know so much more about everything by now.

"What am I looking at here?"

The boy was patient with him, his slowness to comprehend. "That stick-looking thing? That's a fungus growing into the ant's head. Basically, it uses the ant as its legs to get around so it can do what needs doing."

The man stared at the ant, trying to divine anything he could from its little button eyes. At first he felt sympathy for it, then realized no, what he felt was kinship. The ant was lucky. He was lucky. Briefly, he wondered if his thoughts were really his own.

"I guess from high up enough, we all look like ants," the boy said.

The only thing he was certain of was that it would never occur to the ant to bother asking why.

So as another season passed, or maybe it was three, there were days in which the hollow felt as busy as any farm. The work was never done. There was only the blessing of the next day to do it.

The dead came, the dead went home. The only interruption in the process was the morning when, as always, the servant inspected the arrivals one by one, and lingered over one in particular. Her face was long and her eyes enormous, her hair the color of rosewood. She seemed more gaunt than she once had, and he couldn't latch onto a single reason he should have for knowing such a thing.

He put her in the ground like all the others, with a lingering knot in his heart.

The wild man didn't come back for weeks.

But most nights you could hear him baying some unfathomable anguish high up in the hills.

END

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